

IS PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION A FAILURE?

Some of the Current Criticisms Examined

J. GLENN GRAY

FACED with such publications as "How Red Is the Little Red Schoolhouse?" "Red-ucators at Harvard University," or, on a somewhat higher level, *God and Man at Yale*, modern educators can hardly be blamed for feeling that they must close ranks. Virtue must rise to confront vice, modernist Light must take its stand against old-fashioned Darkness. In such a struggle, it is easy to know which side one is on.

But the vociferous crackpots of the moment are not the only ones who have criticized American education during the past twenty years. Within the camp of "progressivism" itself there has been a steady under-

current of self-criticism; nor have all critical "outsiders" been dangerous obscurantists. It goes without saying that demagogues like Allen Zoll, Lucille Crain, and Merwin K. Hart ought to be excluded from any serious discussion of education. But that doesn't mean there is nothing to discuss, or that the discussion has to be postponed because of unfavorable cultural climate. Considering how much honest criticism of present assumptions and practices in American education continues to come from teachers, parents, and alumni of modern schools who have a sincere interest in education's future, the possibility remains that something fundamental is wrong.

TAKING at face value the war cries of the embattled hosts in the current struggle over the public schools, one might almost think oneself in the presence of a duel to the death between fascism and Communism. Here a thoughtful educator, J. GLENN GRAY, suggests that behind the uncompromising and often demagogic attacks on modern American education, and the equally uncompromising and sometimes overzealous replies of its defenders, there exists a current of serious, responsible concern over the question of whether our schools, under the progressive dispensation, are offering a kind of education adequate to the times in which we live and the civilized future we hope for. Mr. Gray, associate professor of philosophy at Colorado College, tries to go to the roots of some of the prevailing criticisms of modern education, assessing both failings and virtues. Mr. Gray has written articles for *The American Scholar*, the *Journal of Philosophy*, and other periodicals, and has made one previous contribution to COMMENTARY: "Munich University: Class of '50" (May 1948); he is also the author of a book, *Hegel's Hellenic Ideal*, published in 1941. Mr. Gray was born in Pennsylvania in 1913 and attended Juniata College, the University of Pittsburgh, and Columbia University.

WHAT is known somewhat loosely as progressivism, or modernism, in American education was conceived and largely developed during the first three decades of this century. The set of ideas invoked is associated with the peculiarly American philosophy of pragmatism and the name of the late John Dewey. Dewey's actual meaning is often different from what such educational pragmatists as W. H. Kilpatrick and Harold Rugg think he means, but his thought has nevertheless been the chief stimulus to the revolt against European intellectualism in the curriculum, authoritarianism in classroom practice, and the emphasis on an intellectual elite in the student body.

Underlying Dewey's views on education was the conviction that America was different. In previous generations we had come to know our distinctive social and political destiny; now we were at last learning that we had a distinctive cultural destiny too. This meant that we had to get rid of a great deal of the past. We could dispense with some of the dubious wisdom of both the Hebrew-

Christian tradition, with its authoritarianism and other-worldliness, and the Greco-Roman tradition, with its predilection for the contemplative life and for the eternal and unchanging. America promised better things, and had a new fate in store. "Our Times constitute a New Day in history; their conditions and problems are new, unlike in many respects those faced by the great masters of antiquity." So wrote Harold Rugg in *Foundations for American Education* (1947). Or, again, William Heard Kilpatrick in *The Educational Frontier* (1933), a collective book to which most of the leading educational theorists, including John Dewey, contributed: "Until the present hour the majority of men have been tied to superstition and other hindering authoritarianisms, on the basis of which real study has been counted either futile or wrong. Now we begin to be free."

We benefited not only by a fresh start without Europe's inherited woes and the heavy hand of tradition; we had also, in modern science, an entirely new instrument. With its wonderful child, technology, modern science was transforming everything. Social change, previously measured in centuries, could now be measured in years. If disorder and irrationality persisted in society, that was only "cultural lag," the failure of institutions to adapt themselves quickly enough. What was needed was more education. The scientific method of empirical observation, hypothesis, and experiment, when transferred from natural science to the problems of men, would progressively establish the good society. Educational practice, as Dewey put it in one of his books, might fairly be called "a kind of social engineering."

Though Dewey had relatively few illusions about the difficulties of realizing the new society, he was optimistic in those earlier years of the 20th century about the long-range outlook, viewing with great satisfaction the steady growth in prestige of the natural and social sciences and the decline of faith in other-worldly religions. His followers, considerably less realistic than he,

were ready even at the first and least glow of light to proclaim the new day already dawned.

THE last two decades—alas!—have not brought that dawn, far from it. Conditions at mid-century have served to dash our over-hopeful optimism as to America's cultural revolution. The intellectual climate has changed radically and appears likely to change much more; on all sides, both abroad and here, current American values are under strong attack.

The Communist assault on all things American can be, and is, disregarded. More telling is the persistent criticism from British, French, and other democratic friends, who find us materialistic, culturally adolescent, superficial, even soulless. Here at home this criticism is echoed, for instance, in *Time*, which accuses our youth of being short on ideas, without individuality, security-obsessed, passive, conventional. In the *New York Times Magazine* and elsewhere, Bernard Iddings Bell has been castigating the schools, and the educational theories on which they allegedly operate, for turning out young Americans who "for the most part are incompetent to think and act intelligently, honestly, and bravely in this difficult era." David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* presents the unflattering thesis that American character is being increasingly formed by the mass media, by the need to conform, by external, transient standards of value.

Specific criticism of Dewey's pragmatic educational ideal goes as far back as the 1930's and has been gaining momentum ever since. To oversimplify somewhat, that criticism may be said to emanate from two main quarters: (1) the spokesmen of traditional culture, the so-called "Chicago school," and (2) the leaders of neo-orthodoxy in religion.

The former group, scornfully called by some pragmatists "the liberal arts scholastics," includes such men as Robert Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, Richard McKeon, Stringfellow Barr, and perhaps Mark Van Doren. Their position is best summarized perhaps by Hutchins in his *Education for Freedom*

(1943), where he attacks the "cults" of skepticism, "presentism," "scientism," and anti-intellectualism, and emphasizes the need for quality and intellectual distinction to counteract educational mediocrity and the vulgarization of American culture. These educators stress the importance of tradition and the continuing relevance of the great books of the Western past, as well as the need to rediscover religious and metaphysical first principles. Though frequently denounced as socially conservative, even reactionary, their preference for quality as against equality in education is supplemented by a strong concern for political and legal equality and a vigorous defense of civil rights. How deep and lasting the influence of this group will be on the educational life of our century is very difficult to estimate at present. Certainly the graduates of Chicago and St. Johns College at Annapolis are providing some leaven, to say nothing of the numerous "Great Books Seminars" and the persuasive writings and lectures of the leading spirits of the school.

The religious critics of progressive education, on the other hand, make a radical attack on the modernists' faith in man. This reaction has come most dramatically from among Protestants, rather than Catholics, though they too are, naturally, in opposition. The renaissance of "neo-orthodox" Christianity, led by Reinhold Niebuhr and a handful of gifted younger theologians, has been one of the startling phenomena of the last decades. Like the Old Testament prophets, their favorite Biblical inspiration, they attack many of the popular credos of the age. Their critique has universal scope but its specific blows are aimed usually at pragmatism, Niebuhr in particular choosing John Dewey as his target. The neo-orthodox theologians stress the limitations of education in general, whether new or old, as a means of overcoming human shortcomings. They see unregenerate, selfish, egotistic human nature, educated and uneducated, scientific and superstitious, at the root of all social evil. This is what the neo-orthodox call sin, the omnipresence of which, even

in the pretensions of a saint, convinces them that our society can be saved only by the rebirth of true religious faith coupled with the grace of God.

The pragmatist confidence in social engineering, technology, and the scientific method is found by these theologians to be but another symptom of overweening human pride, of a *hybris* that is already receiving its appropriate punishment. But this does not mean that the neo-orthodox leaders are indifferent to the question of concrete improvements in the social status quo. Like the "Chicago school," they cannot be accused of speaking for social or political reaction; Niebuhr and his followers are usually in the forefront of liberal movements, often acting side by side with pragmatist educators. While their view has behind it no mass movement on the order of the 19th-century religious revivals, it has penetrated deeply into the consciousness of many reflective people, and probably already forms one of the significant intellectual currents of the 20th century.

There has been, in any case, during the last decades, a widespread loss of faith in science as an instrument of social salvation. Just how widespread is a matter for speculation, but it is certainly evident enough in the college classroom. Even those of us teaching only a relatively short time can detect a change in young people's attitudes. Those students in a philosophy class who a few years ago would have held out vigorously for scientific positivism and progress are on the defensive now or altogether silent. Scientific achievements are still treated with seriousness; scientific pursuits are still vocationally lucrative and, as such, in demand. But the scientist as a culture hero is a rapidly fading image, and the full impact of the collapse of faith in science as mankind's savior is still to be experienced.

WHAT justice is there, all in all, in these attacks? I myself would suggest that the most unfortunate aspect of the pragmatist educational ideal, or of the manner in which it is presented, has been the slighting

of much of the richest fruit of the Western heritage. One cannot read Kilpatrick, Rugg, or most of the others without detecting in them a certain impatience with ways of thought and action before about 1900. Kilpatrick somewhere lists John Dewey as the world's third greatest philosopher, with only Plato and Aristotle taking precedence; but Plato and Aristotle are also Kilpatrick's favorite whipping boys, and one wonders by what instinct of proper piety he is led to give first rank to these arch-intellectuals of ancient Greece.

Here one must note again that Dewey has clearly separated himself from the Deweyites. Though his polemic against the Western tradition has been continuous, it has been selective. Dewey obviously wants to preserve what is worth preserving of the old, and to incorporate it in American experience. Nevertheless, I remember well from my days as a graduate student at Columbia, some years ago, how my professors complained about certain students who adhered to Dewey's ideas having continually to be urged to read works of philosophy written before the 20th century.

This lack of regard for tradition has been unfortunate in many ways. It has certainly ministered to the already well-established strain of anti-intellectualism in our culture. Perhaps nothing about America puts off other peoples as much as this. Today, our neighbors seem to grieve in chorus—in muted tones, to be sure—about the absence of spirituality in American life, about our insensitivity to things of the mind, about our exaggerated respect for bathroom fixtures and up-to-date machines. Some veterans of the recent war find it still painful to recall the average American soldier's contempt for countries like Italy and France, a contempt primarily motivated by the absence of modern conveniences.

Men without a sense of tradition seem to lack certain dimensions of being, and perhaps this is the most damaging thing that can be said about the educational pragmatists. Often quite right in what they say and see, they are blind to so much more.

In a century of expanding perspectives, theirs seem to have narrowed. They continue, for example, to take a rather hostile view of the study of foreign languages, ancient and modern, and have contributed a good deal to the decline of language study in America. Yet from a practical, if not from an aesthetic, viewpoint, never has knowledge of foreign languages been more needed by Americans than now.

The educational pragmatists argue that there is no immediate interest to "motivate" the learning of languages; since the student has little opportunity for personal experience in foreign countries or with foreigners, learning a foreign language is "artificial." Samuel Tenenbaum's recent biography of W. H. Kilpatrick contains a footnote eloquent of progressivist views in this respect: "The writer has seen a class of six hundred and more graduate students in education, comprising teachers, principals, superintendents, vote their opinion in overwhelming numbers that Greek, Latin, and mathematics offered the least likely possibilities for educational growth and with almost the same unanimity they placed dancing, dramatics, and doll-playing high on the list in this regard."

THE progressivists base their doctrines on experience, but this term is often used to exclude as much as it includes. The experience won from books and reflection is not so often meant as the experience of manipulating the tools of the immediate environment. A kind of romantic excess in their notion of experience in education is reminiscent of Rousseau's and Wordsworth's idealization of childhood. Shades of the prison-house close about the growing boy!—it is no far cry from this to the familiar American glorification of youth. In an article a few years back entitled "Children State Their Educational Philosophy," a supervising teacher in Denver reports the results of asking five- to twelve-year-olds to formulate their "educational philosophy." The answers were naturally varied, ranging from "teachers should be nice" to "I'd have

more picture shows." The teacher concludes in triumph: "This 'philosophy' of the children comes close to the best in modern educational philosophy. The ideas are there. School should be 'a place for doing'—for 'learning what we live.'"

This is something more than a set of ideas—it is a cultural climate. A reading of such a book as *The New Leaven* (1928), by the founder of the Progressive Education Association, is at once exasperating, amusing, and inspiring. "The only order that is worthwhile," writes Stanwood Cobb about freedom in the progressive school, "is that which springs from the sense of order of the participants. *Let the compulsion come from within, not from without, is the slogan of the progressives*" (his italics). And he quotes with approval another progressivist on the subject of homework: "Would it not be well for us to give our pupils in this matter the possibility of choice and of self-direction? Shall I, moreover, by my action give the child to understand that he is incapable of making his own choices and plans and of directing himself? Shall I crush his self-respect and his ambition by showing that I consider his interests of little worth? Let me not rob him of his rightful leisure—as important a requisite for right living as food and sleep and brains. Let me not discourage his forming the habit of making his own disposal of his own time. I want his life at school and his life at home to be parts of a whole—a whole that is rich, interesting, purposeful, satisfying living, not a treadmill existence."

Finally we are told by Dr. Bamberger in the same book: "The primary function of a progressive school is not to teach arithmetic, nor languages, nor reading and the like but to have children learn to make, to do, to create, to produce, to study, and *to live together cooperatively and sympathetically*" (his italics). In this single sentence one can feel both the virtues and the vices of the movement.

EVIDENCE accumulates, in David Riesman's book, *The Lonely Crowd*, and elsewhere,

that the progressivist attempt to rid traditional education of an unintelligent standardization and conformity is resulting in another sort of standardization, not less arid than the old. To free the child has in practice proved to be much more difficult than to write about his need for freedom. Newer methods directed to this specific end are sometimes less successful than older methods which boasted no such exalted goal. The same can probably be said for the progressivist aim of creating genuine individualists. Individuality is doubtless a strange and wonderful growth. But it may be that it can be fostered best in an atmosphere of revolt: young people need to feel themselves at odds with the attitudes of their elders and their society, and in their struggle against these they can attain an indispensable sense of direction and accomplishment. If this be true, it is easy to see why individualism is unlikely to result from the modernist methods. In their eagerness to fall in with the youngsters' will and desires, the progressivists have cut the roots of this healthy revolt. More important, by ceasing to stress intellectual achievement and distinction, they have taken away a prime motive for individuality.

To live together cooperatively and sympathetically! Who can deny in today's world the nobility of this aim? But the process of social adjustment and socialization of taste can hardly put one on the high road to free individuality. Nor can adjustment and socialization compensate for the sterner demands of mastering subject matter and the slowly acquired discipline necessary to achieve distinction in any sphere. It is not surprising that progressive schools are accused of creating, in someone's phrase, "thousands of individualists all exactly alike."

It is rash, no doubt, to speak of the type of person progressive education is turning out. But there is general agreement that high goals and adventurousness are not characteristic of them. There is not much swimming against the current; the desire to fit in and to belong are too strong. One is reminded of Riesman's phrase, used in a dif-

ferent context: they know what they *like* but do not know what they *want*.

To blame the decline of individuality on progressivism would of course be going too far. Forces of anti-individualism are embedded in the cultural atmosphere of America. Nevertheless, the modernist educator is not without blame. He has too often conceived the personality of students as utterly plastic, for educational engineering to make of them what it will. Given time and the application of the newest methods, he has believed, all problems are solvable, everyone is "adjustable," all tastes can be socialized. Planning is all. Such a faith, implicit on nearly every page of *The New Leaven* and other progressivist writings, seems naive in underestimating the recalcitrance, the complexities and the unpredictable creativity of human nature. It is also dangerous. For it does not allow the deeper reaches of personality to evolve of themselves, in solitude and silence. The faith in total rationality, in "human engineering," leads to the manipulation of persons in total disregard for the element of sanctity essential to the full human being. Although the visions of George Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seem a little fantastic, we may yet one day need to be saved from facile, transparent individuals for whom the world is nothing but surface.

OF COURSE, it is easiest to criticize the modernists when one overlooks certain basic problems of American education in the last fifty years, particularly on the primary and secondary level. It must not be forgotten that our attempt to give a free basic education to everyone, irrespective of talent, is something new under the sun, and in effect a gigantic cultural experiment still in progress. The insistent question arises: how can we communicate the wisdom of the past to vast numbers of students, many of whom lack any inclination for study of the heritage stored in books and in monuments of art? Has not much of what is called progressivism been the inevitable response to the demands made by a program of compulsory educa-

tion for all? Our schools have been flooded with a mass of students who are simply not educable in intellectual disciplines. Teaching must start where they are, stay close to their immediate interests, and be content to guide them in the only directions open to them; the vast majority of students must be given something that is not primarily intellectual, or else given nothing at all. It is not even a question of watering down and simplifying traditional courses in mathematics, languages, and the sciences; they must be given something altogether different—something more practical than ideas, than history, than scientific formulas, and than the forms of English grammar. Seen in this light, much of progressivism is simply an *ex post facto* set of theories developed to meet the bitter facts of life. And, indeed, the books of pragmatist educators are full of convincing examples of how meaningless traditional learning really is for the average school child of today.

Europeans looking at our educational enterprise are likely to put the matter somewhat as follows, though perhaps not so bluntly: "You Americans are trying to educate too many. You ought first to recognize that large numbers in any population are uneducable, have always been, and will continue to be; moreover, even to educate all the educable is dangerous to any society, since only a small percentage of any population can find jobs requiring much intellectual training. We need, as the phrase has it, 'hewers of wood and drawers of water,' and we always shall. The great danger in education today is the creation of an academic proletariat, unemployed intellectuals who cannot find a place in society and hence will foment unrest. The ills of your American system, if you are realistic, are traceable to your attempt to do the impossible and the undesirable: to educate everyone in a single-track academic system."

Against this argument, cogent as it may seem—what teacher has not felt at times that he is trying to do the impossible and the undesirable?—I think most Americans will stand with the progressive educators in

their commitment to universal education despite all its shortcomings. Admittedly, we do need more variety of educational opportunity to correspond with the variety of gifts and social needs. But to divide our young at an early age, as do many European systems, into those who are to receive an academic education and those who are to be manually trained and soon sent to work, goes against our grain. The notion of a fixed class of "hewers of wood and drawers of water" contradicts not only our Jacksonian heritage but, rightly understood, our Jeffersonian as well. Why should we assume that academic education will unfit us for the common work of the world, particularly when that work is increasingly done by machines and less and less of it requires back-breaking labor? Why, too, should education be so largely tied to vocational training at a time when all of us have increasing amounts of leisure at our disposal? To find appropriate jobs for the educated may well be the more urgent problem, but to fill creatively the leisure of the employed is probably a more crucial one in the long run.

It is certainly a great wrong not to recognize the unique value of the highly gifted individual and provide him with the best education possible. That wrong our society too frequently commits, with consequences that are doubtless more far-reaching than we know. From ancient times the complaint against equalitarian democracy has been that it favors the mediocre at the expense of the superior; and this conviction has helped call forth the protest of the "Chicago school," prompting them to their vigorous countermeasures.

But it is equally true that there is no neat dividing line between the gifted and the mediocre. Intellectual gifts are distributed along an unbroken line, and it is a question of more or less, not difference in kind. The student who seems to belong to the "elite" as a junior in high school may turn out to be ingloriously average by the time he is a senior in college. And the opposite is just as often true; people come into possession of their powers in the most un-

predictable ways. Who knows how many creative intellects have been stunted by the European attempt to sort the sheep from the goats at an early age. The European practice may be justified by economic necessity; America lacks this justification.

IN ADDITION to defending universal public education, the educational pragmatists have also made an inestimable contribution by democratizing classroom procedure and fostering an informal relation between student and teacher. This feature of our educational system is invariably commented on favorably, even enthusiastically, by European students visiting America, and it seems to have been most fruitful in its consequences. The lecture system, so prevalent in America a generation ago, has been challenged successfully in many of our institutions of higher learning. And on the lower levels, the teacher-dominated classroom, rigid in procedure and content, is giving way to something more human and livable. What excesses may have been committed in this democratizing procedure should not blind us to how great a gain has been made over the classroom of a generation ago. Respect for the student's individuality and for the free development of his interests has done much to take away that intense dislike of school which most Americans past the age of thirty can remember only too well.

"There is, I think," writes John Dewey, "no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active cooperation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying" (*Experience and Education*). That this participation and cooperation have sometimes been won at great cost, as critics of modernist schools and methods allege, does not refute Dewey's statement. Nor does the frequent charge

that children "do not learn" in such schools and under such methods. Studies that have been made tend to show that the products of private progressive schools perform on the whole somewhat better in advanced education than do students from traditional schools.* And let us not be altogether "pragmatic" about this; quite apart from how much the children learn, is it not worth a great deal that their teachers are no longer encouraged to be tyrants?

THE problem at the center of our educational discontent at present, however, is not so much *how* to teach and *whom* to teach, as *what* to teach. Beneath all argument about method, it is the content of education that remains most bitterly disputed. And here I think the educational pragmatists are least satisfying, primarily because their assumptions as to the novelty of American experience and the magic power of science in solving social problems are becoming increasingly dubious.

Seen in the sobering light of the last decades, there is little evidence for the assumption that our American civilization constitutes something utterly new under the sun. Certainly it is a new chapter in the story of Western civilization and may turn out to be a very good and important chapter. But the lesson we are learning now is that the cataclysmic changes of recent decades have not really altered the nature of our essential problems. They remain with us and

*My own experience with students from progressive schools is probably not typical but may be worth recording. At the beginning of a first course in philosophy, they are likely to be apologetic, sometimes confiding to me after class that "I went to one of those progressive schools and I'm not used to taking tests and learning subject matter." But the initial disadvantages under which they labor seem to be offset by a freer attitude toward learning and a greater willingness to air their difficulties in class and to their professor in private. At the end of the course one is hard put to discover any great difference between them and the other students. To be sure, in philosophy, unlike many other subjects, all start from scratch in college.

require the virtues familiar of old, and as difficult to practice now as then. For our society collectively, and for each of us individually, a willingness to learn from past history and a proper humility toward the experience of other peoples constitute, I think, the prerequisites of wisdom. It is folly to imagine that we can cut ourselves loose from tradition and go it alone in the 20th century.

But even when we have acquired a proper perspective and a more modest appraisal of our relation to history at large, the problem of what to teach is still only partly answered. How much of the Western heritage can really be communicated to myriads of school children so variously gifted and for the most part so resistant to acquiring the intellectual tools of knowledge? What parts of our heritage are truly worth teaching and how do we separate them from those parts which should be quietly forgotten? There is, too, the problem of criticizing, adapting, improving the desirable parts of that heritage—in Goethe's phrase, the problem of how to "earn it anew, in order really to possess it."

We need to look, in education, for those new ways of transmitting the tradition which alone can give us a sense of continuity with the past. And it seems quite clear that any society must largely perform this by emotive rather than purely intellectual means. Our preoccupation with science and our pride in American differentness have made us neglectful of the educational possibilities of art and religion, which are clearly the chief bearers of tradition. We are rediscovering the value of art in our educational system much more rapidly than we are rediscovering religion. Intimately wedded to art so frequently in the past, religion has increasingly become divorced from all other human concerns. In some sense, I think the crisis in education can be described in terms of confusion about the place of religion in the good life.

SURELY the religious quest is not like the scientific enterprise. Science seeks the

truth about the natural and human world, whereas religion seeks to relate the individual meaningfully to the large issues of life and destiny. The primary question to ask of religion is not: is this or that religion true? but: how adequately does any religion conceive of God? What is its vision of man's ultimate relations and his comprehensive ideals? George Santayana, that unbeliever who understands the essence of religion better than most believers, sees the core of religion in the attitudes of piety and spirituality. Piety is man's "reverent attachment to the sources of his being and the steadying of his life by that attachment"; this is the retrospective aspect of religion, which attaches us in loyalty to parents, ancestors, country, and to humanity at large, indeed to the whole natural cosmos. The prospective side of religion, spirituality, Santayana defines as our capacity to live in view of ideals, to subordinate everything to the pursuit of what we consider to be the ultimate good.

Understood as the individual's attitude toward his total environment and final goals, the religious spirit is obviously as likely to be found in the layman as in the priest, the minister, or the rabbi. The American separation of church and state and the consequent prohibition of formal religious instruction in public schools has had an utterly unintended effect: it has led to the tacit conclusion that religion is not important. If it were—so goes the unconscious reasoning—why would we not try to communicate it to the youngsters in our schools? Yet nothing could have been further from the minds of our forefathers than the elimination of religion from American education; it is clear that they sought only to eliminate religious *sectarianism* from *political* life. In any case, the secularization of our culture, possibly inevitable in any case, has been unwittingly aided and abetted by our schools. The religious heritage, once taught in home and church or synagogue, is now a closed book to millions. Many thoughtful educators are realizing increasingly in our day that the situation is intolerable. John Nason,

Swarthmore's president, recently put it forthrightly: "Since religion is a part of our heritage, and since for an increasing number of boys and girls it is not adequately taught outside the school, it must perforce be taught within the school."

Though our society is not going to reverse the secularizing process easily or quickly, we must surely one day learn that religion is not synonymous with sect or creed. For a generation to grow up without awareness of a religious heritage is dangerously to lose contact with the sources of its individual and collective being. For the religious spirit is not at variance with, but coordinate with, our scientific, artistic, intellectual drives—and probably more inclusive than they. Modern education has left this concern too often untapped or almost completely latent. Here the practical, manipulative intellect, so much stressed by the educational pragmatists, is most at a loss. And this educational failure at the deepest emotional level is no small thing.

BUT is not religious faith as a potent cultural force quite dead? I do not think so. At least not in the minds of our younger generation. Though my experience is greatly limited, I find general agreement, among writers on the subject, that few college students today call themselves atheists, and not so many more, agnostics. To be sure, the majority do not identify themselves with any creed. They are commendably wary of the tendency to wishful thinking in religion. And they seem exaggeratedly skeptical of people to whom religion is a way of earning a living. They say, in effect, as I try to gauge the classroom attitude: We are not unbelievers or even indifferent, but we are not taken in by the hokum that always seems to go with this business.

On the other hand, they are more than open to discussions on the subject with those whose religious faith has grown out of experience or from a generous acquaintance with our heritage. There seems to be a hunger for a religious commitment that is genuine and free from the unction that

so often accompanies it. This is, of course, not unrelated to the confusion and despair of our times. But what religion has not arisen out of such periods of history? Is suffering not one of the recognized ways of finding lasting values?

At all events, there is little chance that this religious concern among young people will lead to the truculent, intolerant, and fundamentally unspiritual faith implicit in such a book as William Buckley's *God and Man at Yale*. Buckley's aggressive orthodoxy is as remote as anything could be from the quieter, questioning search of a younger generation that has been largely separated from formal religious tradition.*

*The above comments on student attitudes toward religion were written before I read Will Herberg's "The Religious Stirring on the Campus" in the March 1952 COMMENTARY. I am gratified to see that they correspond closely to his observations, which are drawn from a considerably wider experience than mine.

IF IT be true that the deeper meaning of the present ferment in education is a growing rediscovery of fundamental values that we had forgotten, and a still confused desire to reinstate them, thoughtful people can yet take scant comfort from the present outlook. The problems we face in education require calmness and sanity, if action is to be wise. But, in this time of troubles, everything is liable to be corrupted by the twin evils of fear and partisan interest, and our young people are too frequently led to pursue, not the goals they really desire, but those that seem to assure them security.

Still, I cannot help feeling that there is some gain for wisdom in the contemporary educational crisis. At least we Americans are rapidly losing our complacency in the face of criticism from without and within. It is barely possible that even our crackpot critics may play the role of Mephistopheles—he who always willed the bad, but achieved the good.

THE DANCER

DAVID IGNATOW

It wasn't to shake her body that she danced
nor to make eyes either, but to spell
in one motion cat, dog, pig and waterfall;
by a flip of the hip or wrist or twist
of the torso: goat, lamb, wind and lover.
She rolled upon the floor and bit her nails,
leaped up and grabbed the air; swung her head
low between her knees and walked that way,
her arms dropping between her outstretched legs:
an old man, an elephant and a stalking tiger;
and just plain being tired of it all.

Flat upon her back, she was the world
before Columbus' time, with here and there
a shape thrown outwards, her stomach breathing,
her breasts sloping down from the world's edge.
With morning at the window and a drink,
she stretches forward to touch toes:
the world coming together, for one more show.

DAVID IGNATOW's poems have appeared frequently in COMMENTARY and other periodicals.